

SCALPEL NIGHTMARES

A new documentary exposes the horrors of botched plastic surgery

BY ELOISE PARKER

The average cost of cosmetic surgery is from \$2,000 to \$8,000. But the cost of having something go wrong during that procedure is immeasurable.

While the number of people opting to go under the knife annually is on the rise, so are the potentially disastrous results.

Both issues are major themes in the new documentary, "America the Beautiful," which opens in theaters tomorrow and exposes tales of doctors who call themselves plastic surgeons after taking short courses in which their only experience may be practicing procedures on tomatoes.

Former "Today" show guest host Mary Nissenson had a brow-lift at 42 and, 12 years later, is still in agony.

"This man took my entire face off," explains Nissenson in the film, who says she opted for a surgeon with a "tremendous reputation."

"From the second I opened my eyes, the agony was so extreme, so excruciating. I wanted to kill myself that second," she says flatly.

Nissenson's still-constant pain was caused by a rare condition called reflex sympathetic dystrophy (RSD), which can occur when nerves are damaged.

It spelled the end of her TV career and the end of her marriage, left her homebound and financially burdened with pain-medication costs for life.

"I'm completely uninsurable," explains Nissenson.

In New York state, thousands of complaints are filed every year with medical malpractice lawyers, and a shocking proportion relate to cosmetic procedures.

"In 2007, we received nearly 2,000 inquiries for medical malpractice cases and half of them were cosmetic-surgery related," says medical malpractice attorney Theodore Oshman, of the New York-based Oshman & Mirisola, LLP.

"Cosmetic surgery is the only area where I have seen an increase in the number of cases," he adds. "The single most common one is breast implant cases. Typically, the implant was not placed properly. The implants may be lopsided, infection may have developed. The next two areas deal with tummy tucks and rhinoplasty. With the tummy tucks, the most common complaint is infection and colloidal scarring."

When Marion, 30, whose name has been changed, opted to get breast implants last year, she chose a surgeon recommended to her by three people she knew. "He'd even been interviewed on television. ... He said 'It's simple, there'll be no scarring, you're healthy, I do this a million times a day,'" says the New Jersey native.

"During the recovery process, my areolas started detaching," explains Marion. "I've basically lost feeling in my breasts around the areola."

The surgeon who performed the operation was later arrested for malpractice and drug possession and has since been shut down. "Looking back, it wasn't worth the financial and emotional difficulties," says Marion. "Everyone always told me little things could go wrong, but no one really tells you the nightmare stories."

Chris, 55, from Albany, was left paralyzed down the right side of her face after a botched face-lift.

"I'd never do it again. I went into this to feel good, and it's been agony," she explains. "The surgeon said she was board certified. She said she was as good as California and NYC doctors and had never had a problem."

"The term 'board certified' can be deceptive," explains Dr. Richard D'Amico, president of the American Society



The documentary "America the Beautiful" looks at the pitfalls of plastic surgery. For example, TV reporter Mary Nissenson reveals how a brow-lift gone bad ended her career. Below, Nissenson before the operation (l.) and after (r.).



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of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS), which represents just over 6,700 members, each of whom must undergo at least six years of specialist training, several examinations, presentation of multiple case studies and continued assessments. "You have board certified podiatrists who may be working as plastic surgeons and don't have to say what board they're certified by unless they're asked."

He suggests taking the following three steps; "First, look for an ASPS certified surgeon." The American Society of Plastic Surgeons Web site (plasticsurgery.org) is a user-friendly resource for starting your search.

Second, check out accredited facilities where the surgery will be performed, at online resources like the American Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgery Facilities Web site (aaaasf.org).

Finally, ensure you have a thorough preoperative evaluation, including laboratory tests. Sometimes, even if the procedure is done properly, pre-existing conditions may be a detriment in recovery. Last year, Kanye West's mother, Donda, died in recovery after a routine liposuction, tummy tuck and breast reduction surgery. According to her autopsy, her death was likely caused by complications connected with heart disease. So knowing your own personal medical history is crucial, before going under the knife.

Cosmetic surgery by the numbers

Only **1%** of U.S. doctors are ASPS board-certified plastic surgeons.

11.8 million cosmetic surgery procedures were performed last year.

20% of cosmetic procedures were performed in a hospital, **21%** in a free-standing ambulatory surgical facility and **59%** in an office-based facility.

.002% is the mortality rate for board-certified cosmetic surgery procedures according to a 2008

ASPS study which evaluated **1.1** million procedures between 2001 and 2006.

Statistics from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons